

FROM A GRANDPARENT'S POINT OF VIEW

By Shirley Smith

I had never heard of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome until we lost our precious Christmas child, Natalie. My life and priorities have changed considerably since that time.

She was born Christmas morning after a very long labor and two weeks after the due date. It was such a joyous occasion. Because of that day, and the fact that on my son-in-laws' side of the family there are no girl grandchildren (only boys), her birth was even more special.

A grandchild is an extension of us through our children. We have dreams and visions of their future just as the parents do. When those dreams are shattered, it is extremely difficult to focus or function completely.

We pretty much take each day for granted – we are so absorbed in work, bills, family and day-to-day situations. Until something tragic happens in our life we often forget just how precious each day is.

A grandparent feels so helpless when their children are suffering so deeply. We not only feel our pain, but we also feel their pain. We would like to protect our children from all hurt, but that is just not possible.

I will never forget the day someone from the hospital called me. Even though I had errands to do that Monday, for some reason I decided to stay home and go out the next day. The voice on the telephone asked, "Is this Mrs. Smith?" – yes, it is – "This is St. Joseph Hospital – your daughter needs you right away – how soon can you get here? Please come to the emergency room." I said I'd be there in 15 minutes on the freeway. So much went through my mind while driving there. I wasn't told anything, I just reacted to the instructions. I didn't ask which daughter (I have two daughters and a daughter-in-law). Which one needed me? Who was hurt? Which of their spouses? Which grandchild? I kept saying, "Please God, not death, not death." When I got to the emergency room, I could hardly contain my emotions and I didn't know who to ask for! I had to name all of them! I was taken to a closed door instead of the emergency area. I thought my knees would buckle. It was such a horrible feeling when the door opened and I saw my youngest daughter sitting with the most helpless and pathetic look on her face. Things were pretty foggy after that. All I could do was hold her. My son-in-law works a distance away and it took him so long to get there because of the heavy afternoon traffic. I felt so sorry for him and wondered what was going through his mind, not knowing anything and having to go slow in the traffic.

My son took the other grandmother and me to the emergency room to see Natalie one last time. All the close relatives arrived at the hospital within a few minutes of each other. There was so much love and sorrow in the room.

After leaving the hospital I started home to make the dreaded phone calls. On the way, I drove to the babysitter's house (where Natalie died). I only knew the area, not the house, so I just drove around until I found a house with a pretty basket hanging by the door. I had never met her, but my daughter had told me about the basket. A woman answered the door and I asked if I was at the right house. I said who I was and I remember saying I thought she needed a hug. We held each other and cried, then she walked me through the house and told me what had happened from the time Natalie arrived at her house that morning. She needed to tell someone in our family and I needed to hear it. My daughter had only been back to work one week. I don't know why I went to her house but we were both glad I did. She is a licensed babysitter in a very clean and cozy home, a very warm person. She has also gone through a lot of suffering this past year.

Four days after Natalie died my nephew and his wife had a new baby daughter. It was so difficult for him to call and tell me the "good news." He kept apologizing and felt guilty to have such a healthy fourth child. But he also knew we were happy for them. It still hurts very much to see pictures of their daughter every few

months as she grows. It is a constant reminder and comparison. They were so understanding when I couldn't shop for gifts for them for a few months. The week before Natalie died, my daughter and I took her shopping and bought a lot of summer clothes. I just couldn't walk through a baby department without crying.

My favorite picture of her is in a bright colored bathing suit I bought for her that shopping day. I feel so sad for parents that do not have any pictures of their child. Natalie was almost three months old and there are so many pictures to enjoy, including studio ones that had just been taken. So many relatives out of state never had a chance to see her but they all now have pictures. Also, pictures were taken at the funeral. The other grandmother sent me a set of reprints and I can never thank her enough for her thoughtfulness.

How do you comfort your children and help them work through the pain? You don't know if you are saying the right or wrong thing or how what you say will be accepted. So many words of comfort may seem cruel and meaningless to people in pain. Sometimes you walk on egg shells. It breaks your heart to see and listen to your children's pain, and some of the things they say and do seem very strange at times. Even though your pain could not possibly be the depth of theirs, you have to keep believing that time heals pain, theirs and yours. Just try to be there always when they need your strength, even if you don't feel very strong. For me, the healing process is when I see them getting through the days or nights and look forward to the next day, and begin to have a few goals to look forward to.

The worst part is if you want to talk about the child and other people do not want to listen or discuss it. We don't realize how uncomfortable it is for other people to talk about the deceased, they are afraid they will say the wrong thing, or upset you, or sincerely feel the best way to "get over it" is just to forget it and put it out of your mind like turning off a faucet. One of the cruelest things a person can say to me is "be glad you didn't have her around longer and lose her when she was older" or "they are young, they can have another one to take her place." That is when I feel like punching someone, but I have to remember they have never been through a trauma of the death of a child and I hope they never have to.

I was so full of anger. Why? This precious baby who was so loved and so wanted. You feel it would be easier to deal with if you could blame someone. There is no one to blame; not the parents, not the babysitter, no one. You just have to keep telling yourself "there is a reason for everything." I may have to accept it but I will never understand why. I still cry at times and have a heavy heart. My daughter and son-in-law have good days and bad days so I cry alone. I don't want to spoil a "good day" for them when it is a "bad day" for me.

Two holidays each year will always have extra special meaning to me—Natalie's birth on Christmas Day, December 25th—and her death, St. Patrick's Day, March 17th. It is amazing how someone you have known such a short time can touch your life and your heart so *deeply*.



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